

Closing Remarks
Steven Edminster, USAID Governance Officer
For the Graduation Program -
Public Service Excellence,
Ethics and Accountability Program (PSEEAP)
Island Garden City of Samal, Davao
November 16, 2005

Mayor Rogelio Antalan;

Lourdes Mamaed, Executive Director of Ateneo de Davao University's Center for Local Governace;

Dr. Steven Rood, Director of the Asia Foundation here in the Philippines;

Distinguished Guests, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Afternoon.

On behalf of the U.S. Agency for
International Development (USAID), I am
honored to have the opportunity to
participate in this graduation program for
the Public Service Excellence, Ethics and

Accountability Program (PSEEAP) here in the Island Garden City of Samal. I want to congratulate all of the participants on successfully completing this workshop. I certainly hope that you have found it useful to the important work that you all do in providing government services to the people of Samal Island. If the workshop outputs that I had a chance to look at just before this ceremony are any indication, I think it's safe to say that you have had a very productive few days.

USAID is very proud to have the Island Garden City of Samal as its partner, along with The Asia Foundation, in the Transparent Accountable Governance Project, also known by its acronym TAG. I remember about a year

and a half ago, shortly after I arrived in the Philippines, I attended a session of the Mindanao Coalition for Transparent and Accountable Governance just across the water in Davao City. That session was very instructive for me. Representatives of the business community, non-governmental organizations and city governments from the seven cities then participating in the TAG Project (now their number has risen to 16) were together in the same room having a very lively discussion on how to improve government services to make them more friendly to both business and the average person. I was really impressed with the candor of the discussion, that all sides were truly listening to what others had to say, and that the participants were

identifying and committing to practical solutions for real problems. One area of discussion from that meeting that sticks out in my mind, and that I have learned a great deal about since, concerns the success that many city governments in Mindanao have had in reducing red tape and the time it takes to renew business permits. I was very impressed to hear from The Asia Foundation that the average time it takes to process an application in the TAG seven cities to renew a business permit has fallen from seven (7) days in 2003 to just 4.5 hours in 2005.

I also distinctly remember the words of Mayor Antalan, who was also there at the time. While I can't remember exactly how he put it, the gist of what he said was that a

mayor really has to be very brave to sign onto the TAG Project and the commitment that comes with it to be fully transparent in one's operations. The reason he gave is that once you start a careful examination of the way your government does business, inevitably you will find things that are going wrong. And with the commitment to openness under TAG, your problems will be out there for all to see, including your critics and of course voters. But thankfully for you and the people of Samal Island, Mayor Antalan has had the wisdom and self-assurance to know that this is the only real way to make progress - that if you want to improve, it's best to face your problems openly and engage others to be part of the solution.

Why am I recounting this for you now? It's because I believe that Mayor Antalan's attitude and approach, confirmed by his government's commitments to TAG, are emblematic of what the Public Service Excellence, Ethics and Accountability Program (PSEEAP) is all about. Through the series of trainings that you just completed, PSEEAP, as its name implies, seeks to instill in city government the values of public service excellence, ethics and accountability, with the ultimate goal of improving customer service and the overall efficiency of government. At its most basic level, I think of it as asking government officials to regularly revisit their assumptions and their approaches toward

their jobs, take a hard look at what works and what doesn't, and all the while involve others - the beneficiaries of government services or customers - in the process.

Even though you have only just completed this training, I understand that you have already had some success in implementing reforms here Samal Island in a manner that is true to the PSEEAP approach, in particular, in improving your local shelter program. It is certainly our hope at USAID that you will be able to use what you learned here in the PSEEAP training over the last few days to do even more. Working for government myself, I know that it can be very difficult for any one individual to feel able and empowered to push reforms

forward, even under the best of circumstances when the need for change is compelling and obvious. One reason for this, of course, is that, for the big issues, there are many people, interests and constituencies that need to be consulted and taken into account. But I honestly believe that if one follows the basic principles underlying PSEEAP and the TAG project, the road may not be easy, but your chances of changing things for the better are greatly increased.

In closing, I want to thank Ateneo de Davao's Center for Local Governance for doing such a good job in conducting this important training and the Asia Foundation for its commitment and contribution. But

most importantly, I want to thank you for your participation and your dedication to effective governance for the people of Samal Island. Again, I congratulate you for successfully completing this course and look forward to hearing more about your future successes.

Thank you and good afternoon.